

**Matthew 25: 1 – 13**  
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May God add understanding and a blessing to this reading from the Holy Scriptures.

This parable from Jesus might strike us differently today than it did a year ago. After going through a summer of spiking oil prices, we know what it's like to be concerned about how much oil we have. In fact, the word “oil” might sound as important for us today as it did for those virgins in the parable. For us, oil has become a symbol of national security. Much of our day-to-day life, not to mention our armed forces, depend on oil. We need oil to ship goods and transport food. We need oil to travel and we need it to heat our homes and businesses. We need oil to fuel and grease the engine of our economy. (Though even with falling oil prices the engine of our economy is still sputtering—its due for the mechanic in one way or another.)

But I think whether we are concerned with the price of fuel or the price of natural gas, oil matters for us. It matters because we need it, and it matters because we will one day run out of it. Oil matters because our lives currently operate with it, and because we have to think seriously about life without it. Oil is central to our story in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

And oil was central for the ten virgins. Oil mattered because five of them had some oil to burn when the bridegroom approached, and five of them did not. Oil mattered because it showed which five were wise and which five were foolish. And from this story where oil mattered so much, Jesus says we can know what the Kingdom of Heaven is like. Oil is central to the story of the Kingdom of Heaven.

But the oil in this parable is *not* petroleum. The oil in this parable is *not a natural resource*. The oil in this parable has its own story. We have entered the world of the parable, and in a parable, words and objects overflow with meaning. As they overflow with meaning they ask us to look and see in new ways.

So then I invite you to look with me and discover what this parable might show us about the Kingdom of Heaven.

Ten virgins go to meet the bridegroom. Who is this bridegroom? From the parable and the larger context of Matthew's gospel we might already suspect *Jesus* as the bridegroom. Some of the virgins address him “Sir, Sir” or, more accurately, “Lord, Lord,” a title used for Jesus. The Bridegroom then speaks saying “I tell you the truth,” a way of speaking Jesus uses when he teaches.

But this isn't simply Jesus as he lives and moves before his death. No, the bridegroom represents a different Jesus, the eschatological advent of Jesus.

I recently challenged Kory to a test of “-ologies.” Between our offices is a marker board where I wrote seven different words ending in “-ology” to see if he could figure out what they meant. They are mostly obscure academic terms. And to be honest, I have to look every one of them up the first time I see them. But Kory is a pretty smart guy (or at least he thinks so) and he quickly figured most of them out. One of those obscure “-ology” words was *eschatology*. The *eschaton*, a Greek word, simply refers to the end times, last days, or final age.

The Bridegroom is the eschatological advent of Jesus—the Christ who comes at the end of the age.

This sets up how we understand the virgins: They represent the church waiting for and eager to welcome the returning Christ. They are the collection of followers who eagerly await the advent of Jesus at the end of the age. On the surface, these ten virgins would all have worn the same wedding clothing. They all brought lamps with oil, and they all got drowsy and fell asleep waiting for the bridegroom, Jesus. What distinguishes the wise from the foolish is the preparation of having extra oil. This is the crucial difference; *it is not falling asleep*, for even the wise ones did that. Everyone gets tired, everyone falls asleep as time drags on and the hours move by.

What matters is having oil, at all times, to keep the light shining until the bridegroom comes. The light can only be sustained by “having oil.” And the foolish virgins ran out of oil. So what did they do? They panic! Of course they panic, they are anxiously awaiting the coming of the bridegroom and they were not adequately prepared. So, they did what many students would do who don't bring their homework to class: “hey, can I borrow your homework for a second?”

But “having oil” is not something that can be borrowed. Sure, physical oil can be borrowed, which is why the wise virgins seem kind of selfish at first. Every time I read this I can't help but think these wise virgins are also “jerk virgins.” But the oil that is necessary to light the lamp of anticipation for Jesus' coming is not physical oil, and it can't possibly be borrowed. No, “having oil” means doing the work of God, faithful discipleship in mercy and love—we can't borrow this.

In another section of Matthew, Jesus tells of the people who get separated like sheep and goats by the king. Jesus says,

“Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me’” (Matthew 25: 34-36).

That is what it means to “have oil,” that is faithful obedience, that is preparation for the end of the age. Oil lights up the mission of the church that awaits the coming of Jesus, the bridegroom who brings with him the fullness of the Kingdom of Heaven. But the foolish virgins didn't have any more oil, they were not prepared.

Now, an easy and common mistake is to search out and pinpoint the foolish virgins of today. The first place we might want to look is outside the church—that's where the foolish are, right? They are the non-believers, the non-Christians, the non-insiders... no, this message isn't for them—it is for us. The foolish virgins represent members of the church itself—this is not a message for those outside our walls, but a parable aimed for those inside the walls. This parable is for you and for me and the church which lives in this community. This parable is for those who eagerly await the coming of Christ and the fulfillment of the Kingdom of Heaven.

But to be honest, I often feel more foolish than wise. I feel like I don't have much oil, and that the little I do have is quickly burning out. I feel as though my light is getting dimmer and dimmer, no matter how much I wait in anticipation. My anxiety mounts like the foolish and my light weakens like their lamps.

There are days when I am not sure if I have any fuel left...when my lamps seem to have run dry... I have nothing left to give, nothing more to say. I have little time for myself, let alone for the work of

caring for God's children who are hungry, hurting, and homeless.

But like the wise, we can have with us another source of oil. The wise know that they will always need *more* oil, because the hour is unknown, and the day of the bridegroom's arrival is a mystery. They must prepare for the unexpected, for the possibility of the midnight hour. And they know where to find an ever-lasting source of oil to carry with them: God's Grace.

You see, what sustains our lamps is oil, but we can never produce or have enough. We will inevitably run dry. So we need to dip into that bottomless source of fuel that is God's Grace. When we are tired and worn, torn down and discouraged, disappointed and despairing, our oil reserves all but shrivel up. When we lose our jobs, when we fail our tests, when we argue with our spouse, when an injury or illness overtakes us, when we fail to serve, when our love lapses and our fears flare, when everything falls in around us... it is then we know full well that our own oil cannot sustain our lamps. But we need not go running into the city to look for oil at a hopeless hour. We have another flask available to us, the Grace of God, the promise of Hope, the Love found in Christ. We have more oil with us, oil that doesn't run dry; we have God's Grace!

I invite you this morning to consider your life, like this story, to be about oil. But not the oil of this world, even as it demands our attention. Though we need to prayerfully consider our stewardship of God's creation and the resources we share, it is not this world's oil that truly sustains us. No, the oil of this world will one day dry up and leave us scrambling for other sources of energy and fuel. And this is precisely what happens to us as well, seemingly every week, as we rely on our own oil to sustain the light of the church. Though it might burn well for a time, it eventually burns out.

I want to suggest this morning that our lives need to be about oil, the oil that feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, cares for the hurting, visits the lonely, takes compassion on the criminal, and shows love to all. But for that to be the mark of our lives, we must carry with us extra fuel, the fuel that will keep our lamps burning bright as we await the completion of the Kingdom of Heaven. And though we may be depleted and running low we have a source of ever-lasting replenishment.

As a Disciple, I trust in the replenishing and renewing power of the table. As Disciples, we can return each week to worship and meet God, but we also have the opportunity to come each week to the table, our source of nourishment. Before the table we remember our Savior and we rediscover the Grace of God, our unending source of oil. Through these elements we can be renewed, we can be refilled. For we approach the table in Faith... to partake of Love... the Love made real to us in Christ... which gives us Hope—our lamps are refueled, our lights can burn brightly again.

The table fills us with Christ so we can wait in preparation for the Kingdom of Heaven. We come to be filled, to leave refilled, and then to burn brightly as servants of God's Mercy—caring and giving, loving and sharing... thanks to the ever-lasting oil of God's Grace. Long after our petroleum reserves have been sucked dry, living with “oil” will always matter for us. For we await our bridegroom.

Amen.